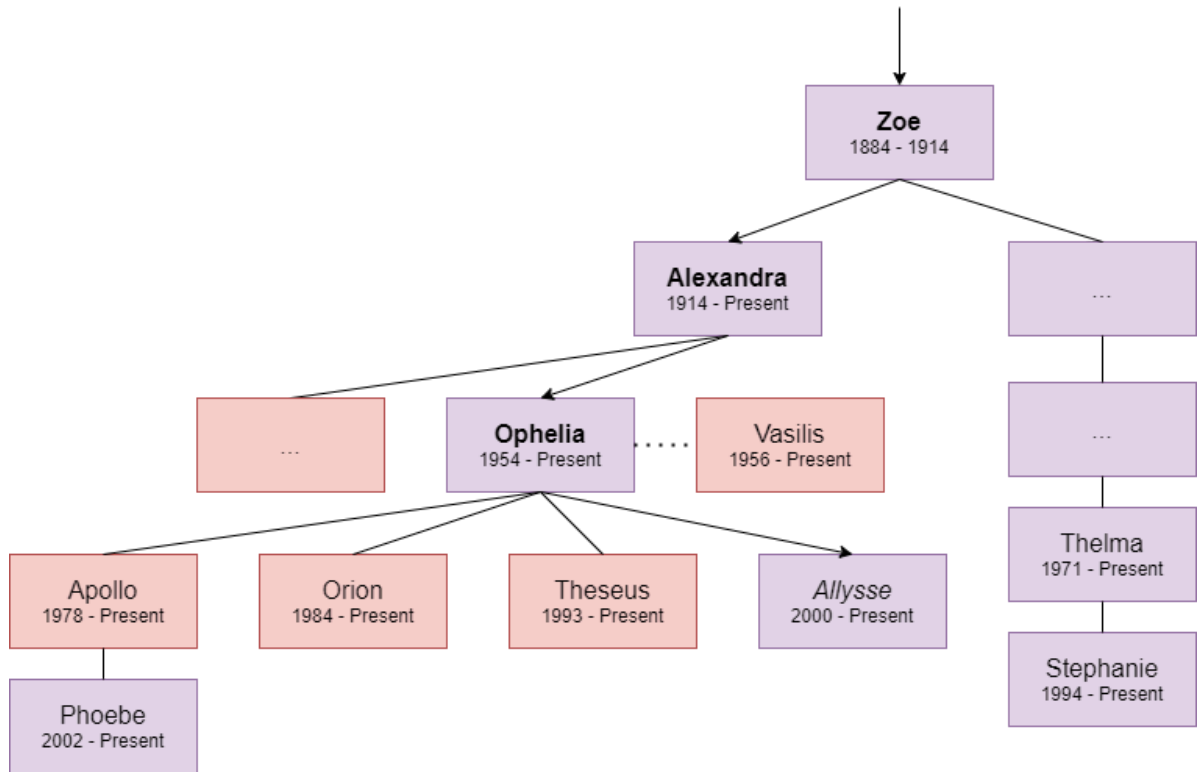


The Immortal Roman Empress

Palaiologos Imperial Family *circa 1 January 2016*



Chapter 1

Mr. Samuel Park

December 31st, 2015

New York City, United States of America

“I told you to wear a diaper,” Tiffany said in that annoying singsong tone. “I told you so. You’re lucky I’m wearing one right now or your head—”

“Don’t you dare you finish that sentence or you’ll wish you were adopted.”

“That doesn’t even make sense!”

Like every New Yorker, Sam hated going to Times Square for the New Year’s countdown. But, for some insane reason, his parents believed every New Yorker loved being trapped like cattle in pig pens. Ugh. Normal New Yorkers wouldn’t want to go. Especially not every year. Especially not in diapers.

Having just turned eighteen last week, Sam was a proud adult. He wasn’t wearing a diaper this time—a choice he was regretting as he shifted his legs, hopping up and down. It didn’t help that he was wholly underdressed: some jeans and an old white hoodie tossed over a T-shirt. In previous years he’d end up as drenched as the Niagara Falls, and he figured the crowd would be enough to keep him warm this time. Apparently, he went too far in the other direction.

Sam was born upstate, but he knew he was a true New Yorker once he started to hate *people*. Foreigners barfing over metal fences. Sightseers snapping photos with their oversized tablets. Tourists standing in the middle of the street, gaping at the sights, ignoring attempts to shuffle them into pens. College undergrads lighting up joints (illegally, obviously), trying to avoid the cops, oblivious to their own smell and smoke. And the puddles. Oh no, the yellow

puddles. Seriously? In public? Even though he knew it was hopeless, Sam hopped on his toes, scanning around for a bathroom somewhere. Anywhere.

Tiffany, his little sister, was perched on his shoulders much to the exasperation of other bystanders. Sam thought he would finally be free from the annual torture at Times Square—his parents were celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary in Hawaii—but his sister had cried and wailed until he relented. Unlike Sam, Tiffany had perfectly dressed for the occasion: pink scarf, pink gloves, and even a pink little pom-pom hat.

“Why did you want to come here again?” Sam asked. “You see the stupid ball every year.”

“Who cares about that? Didn’t you hear? The princess is here! I wanna see her! I wanna see her!”

Sam could feel the diaper through her jeans which only reminded him of his own bladder problems. “You won’t. She’s prolly right under the ball. C’mon, let’s go back home. You’d see her better on the TV.”

“You two kids want to see the princess?” asked a woman nearby. In her hand was a glass of amber liquid, and Sam wasn’t sure if it was apple juice, alcohol, or something worse. A conked-out man drooped around her shoulders. It was impressive that she could support his weight.

Sam said no while Tiffany simultaneously said yes. They glared at each other.

“Ha. I see where you’re both coming from. Most people don’t care nowadays, but the Empire’s royalty is a lot more interesting than my country’s nobility.”

“You a tourist?” Sam asked, teetering on his feet. Tiffany kept swiveling around.

“Isn’t everybody a tourist here?” she asked. “You’re not? Don’t the locals hate Times Square?”

“You don’t have an accent, missy,” Tiffany said. “Where are you from?”

“Thank you, dear. I’ve worked hard to lose it. I’m from Italy.” She grinned at Tiffany’s astounded face. “Surprised an Italian is interested in Imperial royalty? My fiancé hates that I am. Luckily, he’s passed out from all the—ahem—apple juice.”

“You shouldn’t drink so much juice,” Tiffany said. “You don’t wanna go to the bathroom before midnight.”

“I don’t need to worry about that,” she said, winking as she jiggled her glass. Sam winced, his bladder shifting again. Nobody asked, but the stranger continued rambling in a drunken stupor.

“Let’s see. . .ah, Romans. Why don’t I hate the Imps? Well, I’m from Sicily so my great. . .great. . .?” She paused and counted on her fingers. “Two greats. My great-great-grandparents were born in the Empire. I’m Italian now, yes, but I’ve always had a soft spot for the Byzantines.”

“Do you know where the princess is?” Tiffany asked. She wasn’t really paying attention and was still scouring the crowd.

“Princess Allysse Palaiologos?” she asked

“Yup! Princess Alice Pa-lay-o-legos.”

“Close enough,” the stranger said, laughing. “I don’t know. I don’t think she’s at the main stage right now. Maybe she’ll show up later?”

Sam’s bladder did another somersault. “We’re outta here. I’m not lasting ‘til midnight.”

“What?” Tiffany gasped, her mouth a small, surprised ‘O’. “No! No, no, no, no, *no*! It’s not my fault you have to go to the bathroom! I’m staying here! We have to see the princess!”

“I have a solution,” the stranger said, again shaking her glass. The liquid swooshed around. Both in the glass and in his bladder.

“No. Definitely not,” Sam said. “Tiffany, we’re leaving. Now.”

Tiffany kicked and screamed as she tried to free herself. Fortunately, however, it was easy for a high school senior to restrain a sibling still in elementary school. To Sam’s relief, it wasn’t hard breaking out of the pen. The cops were more concerned with keeping people out rather than keeping them in.

Sam glanced at his watch, a cheap hunk of plastic. 11:18 PM. Plenty of time to rush back home before the crazy diaper-wearing crowd dispersed after midnight. Tiffany’s screeching had largely stopped, now replaced with the occasional sniffing.

“If you wanted to see the main stage, you should’ve told me in the morning,” Sam said. “Not right after dinner.”

“But I didn’t know then!”

“Tough luck. Beg Mom and Dad for us to vacation to Constantinople next year.”

“Why don’t you wanna see her?! She’s a princess! A f-r-e-a-k-i-n-g princess!” Tiffany said, spelling out the word. Sam was under the impression Tiffany thought that was the f-bomb, but he sure wasn’t going to correct her.

“So? She did nothing to get it.” Was his sister in a princess phase? Last month it was ponies, and the month before it was platypuses.

“But the Roman Emperor actually does things,” Tiffany whined.

“Yeah, one of the last places where that happens. I wouldn’t be surprised if they turn into the Roman Republic this—uh, next—year.”

Oh no. He said the wrong words. Tiffany’s face was swelling up.

“She’s done nothing to you!” she said. “Why are you a meanie-head? Who doesn’t want to be a princess? She’s pretty, she’s smart, and she’s kind!”

“Imperial propaganda,” Sam muttered. “Okay, I don’t have anything against the Imperial family, but—”

“Meanie! Meanie-head!” Tiffany wailed again, breaking from his grip. Ducking under his swipe, she scurried away. Sam stood there, stunned and still holding the empty glove, before mentally cursing and rushing after her.

“Tiffany! Tiffany, you’re in big trouble!” he yelled. Oh man. Oh man oh man, he was in deep waters. Seriously? Did she really have to run away in Times Square in the busiest time of the year?

Sam wasn’t out of shape, but he couldn’t keep up with the boundless energy of a determined child who could slip between the cracks of the crowd. As he ran down the blocks, he had to apologize often to the numerous bystanders, most either too amused or too drunk to help.

Finally, when he got close, the infuriating child squeezed into a gap in a pen, disappearing from sight.

“Tiffany? Tiffany!” Sam said, his stomach flopping. He tried to shove his way in, but a fat bearded man blocked him, and Sam bounced off his large heavy jacket. “Hey, hey, my sister just ran inside, let me get her and—”

“Bruh, don’t bump into me. I’m about to puke,” he said. “Hey man, that’s a nice excuse and all, but you ain’t getting in.”

“Listen—didn’t you just see my sister? I don’t have time for this.”

“Duuuude, why don’t you just call her?”

“She’s too young—she doesn’t have a phone and—”

“Yo, why don’t you just chill? New Year is almost here. No use stressing, man.”

“What’s the matter here?” a fresh voice said. Sam looked up to see yet another large man, but this time it was a cop. He crossed his arms, clearly unamused at yet another altercation.

“Great timing. Listen, listen, my lil sis just ran off into that pen. Can you help me find her?”

The cop sighed. “Name?”

“Tiffany. Tiffany Park. She has black hair, pink clothes, elementary school—”

The officer pushed a radio’s button on his belt. “Missing juvenile. 42nd Street. Girl, black hair. Wearing pink. Over.”

“Great, now can you please let me through? She’s somewhere in this pen and I promise to get out when I see her.”

“Sure. Go ahead, kiddo,” said the large bearded man, stepping aside. “Shouldn’t be too hard to find her. I reckon not many people are wearing pink. Just avoid that puddle there and. . .oooooh, you stepped in it.”

Ignoring the “yellow juice,” Sam whipped his head back and forth as he scanned for the little brat. Mom and Dad were going to kill him when they found out. Wait. Maybe they wouldn’t. Maybe he could bribe the spoiled urchin to not tell them. What would it take? Doing her laundry for a week? Her math homework? Sam glanced at his watch again. 11:52. He could hear the commentators on the stage. He better find her before midnight. Wait. Maybe it wasn’t

that bad. Surely Tiffany knew her way back to the apartment? In this crowd, surely nobody would try abducting—

Wham. Sam tasted the asphalt ground. Spluttering, he first thought a drunk belligerent bumped him down. But there were far too many screams for it to be that. Wait. Screams? Why were people screaming? It wasn't midnight yet. Or was it? Sam tried looking at his watch, but his ears were ringing too hard and his eyes were out of focus. 11:53? Yeah, strange. Dang, it looked like the watch also cracked when he fell. Well, it was time for a new watch anyway, but what was with all the yelling?

He rubbed his eyes, his hazy vision slowly returning to normal. Hey! There was something pink over there. Tiffany! He tried calling out, but his mouth wouldn't listen. His legs took forever to respond, too. What was with him? He didn't drink anything weird, did he? He stepped into another puddle. Yeah, that definitely wasn't apple juice. It was too reddish-brown for that.

It was odd he could see Tiffany so far away. Had everybody started clearing Times Square? That made sense. It must've been after midnight. He was glad the crowd didn't sweep away Tiffany. Her arm waved at him. The rest of her body was obscured.

"I finally found you," Sam said. "You're in big trouble when we get home. C'mon. Let's get going. Stop hiding around in this pile of bodies. C'mon. You need help getting out?"

Wait. Pile of bodies?

Sam dropped the small gloveless pink arm in horror.

Chapter 2

Imperator Ophelia “The Feeble” Palaiologos, Augusta of the Imperium Romanorum, Basilissa Rhomaiôn in Konstantinopolis, Strategitissa of Thrace, Defender of the Faith, God’s Regent on Earth, Καῖσαρ of the Romanoï

January 1st, 2016

About 55,000 kilometers above Kiev, Ukraine

The monarch grimaced as she read the epithet in the newspaper. If she was younger, she would’ve complained. Not publicly, but maybe to her snoozing husband, his loud croaking snores disrupting the otherwise luxurious flight.

The private airplane was virtually empty besides the two sovereigns and a handful of staff. The Emperor was still dressed in a formal deep purple lilac waistcoat and a tweed skirt, perhaps a bit too eager to leave Moscow to waste time changing. Pairs of heavily armed soldiers, part of the Varangian Guard, stood silent but alert at the entrances to the main chamber of the 747. When she was a child, the Emperor would constantly attempt to break them out of their watchful trances. But in her sixty-one years, she has never seen them break rank once.

Ophelia folded up the newspaper, pausing when the crackling interrupted her spouse’s snores. He too was still dressed formally, but with an ill-fitting suit that did little to hide his weight. The Feeble? That was not how she wished to be remembered for the centuries to come. While she wasn’t the greatest Emperor of the Empire, she certainly wasn’t the worst. The Diplomat, perhaps? The Negotiator? Maybe the public would be more favorable after her death.

The talks with the Russians went well. Tensions had always been lukewarm between her and their President, but she at least dissuaded him from invading Ukraine in the near-future. Not

to mention she was one step closer to bringing the Roman Empire into NATO. Only a few more concessions with Turkey who were much against their entry.

Fair, the negotiations with Turkey were less than ideal, but what were the alternatives? Annex the republic back into the Empire? Continue letting Turkish terrorists bomb their oil drilling rigs? There was no good solution. The Empire's conservatives were delusional. The Republic of Turkey was here to stay, and she might as well have recognized it on their 100th anniversary. True, Mother wouldn't talk to her for a month after that. She always had a ridiculous loathing of the Turks. And the Germans. And the Austrians. And the Japanese. And the Italians. And the Romanians. And the Spanish. Practically everyone, for that matter.

Ophelia curled her toes at her remembrance of Mother. Undoubtedly, the press was comparing the two women, but how could anyone live up to Mother's legacy? Even among the ancient male Emperors, only a few could match her accomplishments. Ophelia was bound to be a disappointment, especially in this peaceful world. She once dreamed she could match Alexandra Palaiologos's feats, but time healed all illnesses, even delusions of grandeur.

"The Feeble." Well, it could've been worse. At least it wasn't "the Drunkard" or "the Dung-named" or "the Fat." The woman still remembered the day when she was a small child and learned Mother's epithet: "the Pirate." She laughed for hours at how ridiculous yet fitting it was. She never once saw her without her signature eyepatch and peg-leg, both byproducts from defending Konstantinopolis during World War II. She was undoubtedly currently shuffling around in New York City, keeping a watchful eye over Allyse. The thought stressed her out and made the Empress want to sleep. She couldn't imagine how Mother, already over one hundred, found the energy. Perhaps her own epithet was fitting after all. She never was quite the same after Allyse's labor. The doctors were all worried about the birth at such an old age.

That reminded her. Ophelia wondered if her daughter liked her present. She couldn't fathom why Allysse wanted to travel to the States for her birthday instead of celebrating in Konstantinopolis. Like an ordinary peasant parent, even an Empress couldn't figure out the inner workings of her child's mind. Allysse normally was the picture-perfect heir apparent, if only a bit too empathetic and a tad too childish, but her latest plea was odd.

The Emperor hoped her daughter would absorb her latest lesson: if you did not pull the trigger, you did not commit the murder. Obviously, that wasn't true. But she feared her daughter would crack if she faced all the deaths she would both indirectly and directly cause in the future.

"Tired?" her husband said in his thick accented Greek. "Lost in your thoughts? Or ignoring my snoring?"

The Emperor exhaled some air from her nose. "Just thinking about how Mother finds the energy to run around. The mere thought of standing next to loud Yankees hollering about a ridiculous metal ball is exhausting me."

His weathered hand rested over Ophelia's own. To Mother's annoyance, her husband had some Turkish blood. But he was rich. It was a marriage to secure the land needed to construct the bullet trains all across the Empire. True, she could've merely confiscated the property, but gone were the days where the peasants wouldn't rebel against such acts of tyranny. She already had enough enemies.

True, the union was at first loveless. It was certainly on thin ice when he only gave her son after son after son. Yet after Allysse, their hearts finally intertwined. Mother dryly remarked that royalty must be the only scenario where having children actually saved the marriage.

“Mother-in-law still finds the vigor to smack me with her cane,” her husband said. Like many other close acquaintances of the former Emperor, he didn’t think of her too highly. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was sapping your life force.”

Ophelia chuckled. This chuckle evolved into a chortle, and this chortle evolved into a full-on guffaw. After a while, the husband had no choice but to join in, filling the 747 with two old, raspy gurgles. Despite this, the Varangian Guard remained vigilant, their gloves still tightly gripping their AK-74s.

“Halt,” one of them said to a short, thin stranger just outside the back of the main cabin. The other immediately focused his sights on the man who raised both of his hands. “Who are you? What is your business?”

The other Varangian Guards tensed. The number of passengers on the plane was not high, and dutifully double and triple-checked by the eternal protectors of Imperial blood. Anyone unknown was a variable. Donning pure red and gold uniforms, the Guard’s blazing outfits were intended to intimidate any potential assassins to the Palaiologoi, with a dress code more ceremonial than practical. Even their helmets had a red stripe bisecting the top, a reminder of the crista of a bygone era.

“I wish to have an audience with the Emperor,” said the thin stranger in a dry, hoarse Greek. He was very unkempt. There was a terrible stench around him as if he hadn’t showered in weeks. Not only that, his skin stretched taut on his bones, resembling a skeleton wearing an undersized suit.

The husband perked up at the accent. It was like his own, one from the deep mountainous interior of Anatolia. All traces of merriment died from the Emperor’s face as she looked at the unwanted guest.

“Get onto the floor,” a Varangian said. “Hands behind your back. You are to be detained until we return to Konstantinopolis and discover your identify and motive. Do not resist or—”

“Imperator. Your daughter and mother are dead,” the thin man said. He looked even more tired than Ophelia did. His eyes were sunken, and it was clear he hadn’t eaten in days.

“Don’t take him away,” the Imperator said. “What is this?”

“The news should come soon. It was a happy accident. The gods are on our side,” the man said. He looked at the floor, avoiding the Imperator’s glare.

On cue, both the Imperator’s and her spouse’s phones started ringing. The Empress was frozen, not wanting to pick it up. Near the front of the main cabin, an aide rushed in, unable to walk straight and knocking over a stack of books. Trembling, she held up a tablet.

“BREAKING NEWS—BOMB DETONATED IN TIMES SQUARE. CASUALTIES UNKNOWN.”

While the color drained from the Emperor’s face, the Empress’s was unchanged. Her toes curled even further as she asked, “What faction are you from?”

“That famous Palaiologoi arrogance,” the thin man said. He murmured something intelligible under his breath. “Are you confident your family is unharmed? Your Majesty, if your so-called Varangian Guard cannot prevent me from boarding your private airplane, why do you think they can protect your teenage daughter and centenarian mother? Are your Guards even in New York? Perhaps you didn’t pay them enough. That was the downfall of many Romanoi Emperors back in the day.”

“Answer my question.”

“Why should I?”

“You are awfully uncooperative for a man soon to be executed for treason.”

“We’re all going to die one day,” the thin man said. “Some sooner than later. And for the people aboard this plane? Perhaps in five minutes or so?”

A Varangian Guard tackled the thin man, drawing out handcuffs. As he hit the floor, he coughed out blood, spraying it onto the Emperor’s heels. The other Varangians pulled up nearby, their rifles aimed at his head.

“Enough,” the Emperor said. “Release him.”

“Your Imperial Majesty,” a Varangian said. “He’s a threat. We cannot guarantee your well-being or—”

“I do not repeat orders,” the Emperor said. For the first time, they could hear some emotion, a snarl in her voice. They immediately released him, but still kept their sights focused.

“You’re smarter than I thought, Ophelia,” the thin man said, brushing some imaginary dirt off his cuffs. “Can we have a wee chat? We have little time. May your aide bring us some tea? I prefer black with a hint of sugar.”

“Bring us some refreshments,” the Emperor commanded, ignoring the thin man’s obvious rudeness. “Guards? Do your jobs and find the bomb, and disarm it if possible. Vasilis?” she said, nodding at her husband. “Send out an alert along with orders to execute my last will and testament. Perhaps you can even parachute from the airplane if possible.”

“A cool head even in such a situation. A fine example to rulers everywhere,” the terrorist said as the entourage executed her orders without any complaints. The aide rushed back mere seconds later, pushing a cart of various drinks.

“What is your dead man’s switch?” the Emperor said, gesturing for the aide to pour her some wine. The aide couldn’t stop trembling and squeaked an apology when she spilled some, but the Emperor didn’t pay attention.

“Don’t forget the sugar in my coffee, please,” the thin man said. The aide gnashed her teeth, but she couldn’t prevent herself from crying as she opened the sugar pack.

“Will you answer my question?” the Emperor said, nodding at the aide. The servant yelped and zoomed away with the cart, its contents spilling all over the carpet.

“Ophelia, I am not so stupid to disclose that around your Guards,” the thin man said. “But rest assured, you will die. If you keep me in a good mood, some of your crew may escape.”

“I understand. Why do you wish to kill the Imperial line?”

“You’re insulting me with your lack of intelligence,” he said, finally looking up at Ophelia. “Or does your epithet refer to feeble-minded? It’s not hard to fathom.”

“There are hundreds of reasons one wants to assassinate me. What is yours?”

“Personally?” he said. “Not much. I’m not a Turk. My family wasn’t relocated due to the bullet trains. I don’t mind your nuclear power plants despite Chernobyl and Fukushima. I don’t care about how you keep bowing to the Americans and Russians. I disagree with your foreign policy in the Middle-East, but I feel you’re an adequate leader of a nation.”

“Are you stalling for time?”

“Of course not. I would be lying if I say my group didn’t have Communists or Turks or supremacists or fundamentalists who wish to topple you for other reasons. But I care about the restoration of the Republic. And unlike the United Kingdom’s, your blood won’t step down. Why is that? Pride? Arrogance? Tradition?”

“The Republic hasn’t existed for two millennia.”

“And the Romans haven’t seen such glory since,” the thin man said. Saliva dribbled from his mouth, but he made no effort to wipe it away. “Hadrian? Constantine? Justinian? Overrated. Trash. Squanderer. Basil Bulgaroktonos? Alexios Komnenos? John Komnenos? Blood-thirsty.

Ruthless. Timid. Michael Palaiologos? Konstantina Palaiologos? Anna Palaiologos? Envious. Backstabbing. Delusional. Georgia Palaiologos? Isabella Palaiologos? And your own very dear mother, Alexandra Palaiologos? Mad. Cold. *Insane*. Tell me. Why hasn't the Empire reached the territorial boundaries of the old Republic? Yes, the early Empire was bigger. But could it hold it ever since Caesar, accursed Caesar, stabbed the Republic in its crib?"

"You know your history," the Emperor said. "Then you should also know what happened to the Empire during World War I."

A wry grin. "That would be your grandmother, would it not? Zoe Palaiologos? We were close. So close to becoming a Republic. Until we were dragged into that accursed war between power-hungry monarchs. All hopes for a republic died, and we have lost territory ever since."

"We have not lost territory. At least for nearly a century."

"Was Turkey not part of the Empire?"

The Emperor narrowed her eyes. She did not speak.

"Your recognition of the Republic of Turkey had given us many more supporters," the thin man said. He stood up, straightening his dirty suit. "Romans fear the worst. They do not want to see the country slowly perish. Nearly six hundred years ago, the Empire was merely the city of Konstantinopolis. Will history repeat itself?"

"My daughter will not repeat my mistakes."

"Your daughter is dead."

The Emperor glared at him. "There's an heir. There's always an heir. Distant branches. All who have a matrilineal line to Konstantina Palaiologos."

He scoffed—or was it a cough? “Are any of those heiresses groomed for the throne? Once you, your mother, and your daughter are dead, that will be all that’s needed to convince the people that it’s time to enter the modern age.”

“The people will never approve of such violent means to an end.”

“No,” he said. “But what if they thought I was a Turk?”

The Emperor’s pupils finally dilated to which the terrorist laughed, a pitiful, wheezing convulsion. “No. What are you doing? You will spark another war. Another unnecessary war. Thousands will die. For what?”

“For the Senate and people of Rome, dear Ophelia,” he said. He looked at his slim wrist; it had no watch. “We’ll be entering hell soon. Before we go, may I ask you a question? What is Project Dragon Flame?”

The little color remaining on Ophelia’s face drained away. “How do you know that name?”

“We have a Japanese spy,” the man said. “Regrettably, we do not know more, but the phrase has surfaced on several occasions. Can I have some closure? Is it a weapon? Is it a bio-virus?”

“Over my dead body.”

The thin man’s sickly laugh was the last sound she heard.

*Chapter 3**Mr. Samuel Park**January 1st, 2016**New York City, United States of America*

Sam picked up the arm as quickly as he dropped it. Doctors could reattach well-preserved arms, right? He'd just have to freeze it. There was no fridge, but maybe it was cold enough outside? He cursed. And cursed again. Sam was never really the type to curse, but the situation was quite apt. Wait. Why was he thinking about such idiotic nonsense? Stop. Stop thinking. His sister was dying.

"Tiffany!" he called out, doing his best to dig through the bodies with one hand. "Tiffany! Are you there? It's okay. Everything's okay. I'm here."

As time went on, his digging and thoughts became more furious and frantic. He went from mound to mound, desperate to find a shade of pink. "I'm not mad at you, Tiffany. You only wanted to see the princess, and that's okay. There's nothing wrong with that. I should be the one saying sorry. I'm sorry I bad-mouthed the Imperial family. You were right. Let's go to Constantinople next summer. It'll be fun."

He found a cane which made the digging a lot easier. He tried to ignore the fact that most of the bodies weren't stirring. He didn't dare to think any of them were corpses. If they were corpses, then they were dead. And if they were dead, then the more likely his little sister was dead, too.

"Tiffany!" he yelled out again. "Please stop hiding. I'll do your laundry. I'll do your math homework. You haven't done it yet, have you? Your stupid teachers are stupid for giving you homework over winter break. I'll do it for you. Please. Please, just come out."

Sam knew he couldn't have been scavenging for more than a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity. All noisy distractions were dull as he dug and dug and dug. Corpses—no, bodies—were all background mirages unless they were pink. He'd sometimes jolt at a hint of ruby or a dash of scarlet, but he'd continue digging until he spotted something out of the corner of his eye.

"Tiffany!" he roared, tugging with all his might at the pink. For once in his life, he was happy, so incredibly happy, to hear his sister wailing.

"My arm! My arm!" she cried. Normally her shrieks would send him in the opposite direction, but right now he could not be gladder.

"Doctor!" he cried out. The world around him sharpened and focused. He wasn't the only one digging around the mounds; there were also officers and other howling people scrambling through the corpses.

The center of 7th Avenue was blown to smithereens, forming an eerily perfect circle of the blast zone. The entire area was a dark black. Sam wasn't sure if the color was due to the asphalt or ashes from, well, the obvious. If it wasn't for all of his adrenaline, he would've barfed. And all around the edges of the hole were the mounds. The piles weren't objectively high, maybe three feet at most, but in this case any height was too high.

He could hear the dull wails of the ambulances as he half-ran, half-jogged out of Ground Zero. His sister was still crying, but he just held her tight and soothed, "It'll be okay. It'll be okay. You're safe. Nobody's hurting you anymore."

An EMT met him halfway. Sam nearly shoved Tiffany into his chest, dismembered arm and all. The EMT turned back around, running back to the ambulance. Sam continued following, but the EMT mouthed something. Strange. Could he not hear him? Was his hearing still busted?

Realizing Sam's deafness, the EMT gestured towards the medical truck. Sam followed his fingers to see an ambulance already full of people. Moaning, crying, cursed, burned, disabled, dying people. Firefighters, cops, and EMTs were slowly trickling nearby, all carrying a body. Sam watched as he squeezed Tiffany into an ambulance, placing the arm on her before slamming the door shut. And then it sped off.

Sam was too young to have remembered 9/11. Understandably, nobody enjoyed talking about it. He thought he'd never truly understand or empathize with the gravity of the day the world changed. Looking at the hellscape before him, something clicked inside him. He still thought he'd never understand 9/11, but he was a step closer. Still aching all over, he rushed back to the gaping maw with a singular aim: to help.

He was gentler with the corpses this time. A demon in the back of Sam's head hissed that it didn't matter anyway, but he clamped that shut. He also had to forget another thought: "What if there were survivors while you were looking for Tiffany?" Now was not the time. Time was of the essence. He'd deal with that regret later.

That obsessive concentration had left him. Now he was feeling detached. As if he was looking at his body in third-person, mindlessly moving bodies until he could find one with a pulse. He briefly wondered if that was a trait humans evolved to deal with similar situations. It certainly helped. Sam had always felt queasy when he donated blood, but now the sight of it barely elicited a response.

Like before when he was excavating for Tiffany, Sam was on the inner side of the mound. He wasn't sure how he ended up here instead of the outside. He also didn't know why he wanted to be on this side. There was more death. It was closer to the blast. Bomb? Whatever it was.

Maybe he could save more lives if he was on the outside, but he found his sister near here. And if she was miraculously alive, then maybe there were some more poor souls who also still breathed.

He paused when he looked at a body. It looked somewhat familiar. The woman—or what remained of her, her entire backside and a leg was burned away—was incredibly old. Sixty? Seventy? Maybe eighty or more? He flipped her around to get a better look, and then he cursed yet again. There was no mistaking that eyepatch. Sam could hardly recognize many political leaders or even celebrities—he doubted he could identify New York’s senators—but there was only one old woman in the world who would wear an eyepatch.

“Yiayia. . .” a girl’s voice said, stressing the second syllable. A pale hand reached out from the mound and grabbed Sam’s by the wrist. He blinked. Normally he wouldn’t be able to place the language, but he instinctively knew who uttered that sad, mournful word.

“Allysse. . .” he said, before the hand clamped his mouth shut.

“Αμερικανική?” she said. He couldn’t see her face so he didn’t know if she was as confused as he was.

Moving the hand aside, Sam fumbled for words. When was the last time he spoke?

“E-excuse me? I’m sorry, I-I don’t speak Greek.”

“Shhh,” the girl said, putting her pointer finger to his lips. “Do not let anyone know I am here.”

She had a slight accent, but her English was immaculate. It captivated Sam. “What should I do?”

“Is there anybody near to here?” Her words had a slow, deliberate cadence. Was that the way she normally talked? Or maybe it was due to speaking a non-native language? Or rather, perhaps she chose her words carefully. Wisely. As if every syllable mattered.

Sam looked around, also slowly and deliberately. “No. M-most people are on the other side of the mound. Nearest person is, uh, seven feet away?”

“Two meters,” she said, converting as if it was second nature. “Do you know anywhere safe near here?”

“W-what? There’re ambulances nearby; they’ll take you to a hospital.”

“No,” she said. “Please, nowhere public. Is there anywhere else?”

“My home is about a forty-minute walk from here. D-do you think you can make that?”

A pause. “Do you have a mask? Or do you have anything to cover my head?”

Sam patted his jeans, even if he knew there was nothing in there, and swept his surroundings again. “Nothing. Oh, I have a hoodie. I can take it off.”

Another pause. “Yes. Please turn around. Please alert me if anybody is coming.”

He hurriedly pulled off his hoodie, hoping the royal princess of the Roman Empire wouldn’t mind all the nicks and scratches (Did he really just think those words?). He wasn’t feeling cold during the search, but the frigid cold air hit him like a truck and he couldn’t stop his teeth chattering as he handed it off behind him.

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” she said, and Sam turned around; she had pulled herself out of the pit. His first impression was underwhelming, honestly. Maybe it was because of his dirty white hoodie which she kept drawn over her head. She was shorter than expected—not much more than five feet. A lavender-purple handkerchief obscured her nose and mouth but not her murky, muddy, brown eyes. Her similarly brown hair was tied in a long, thin braid, but threatened to be undone.

Upon closer inspection, even someone like Sam could pick out wisps of an opulent lifestyle. Her eyebrows were perfectly groomed—were they shaved and replaced with fakes? He

could count her exact number of long eyelashes, all of them curved straight up. Even if he couldn't see the rest of her face, she was not lacking in eyeshadow, mascara, eyeliner, and countless other makeup Sam wouldn't be able to name.

"Do you know where your home is?" the princess said. Sam jerked—he wasn't aware he was staring at her for so long.

"Don't you have servants? Guards? What were their names? Varangs or something?"

Again, she put a finger to her lips. She squatted down, smoothing out her long dress, and beckoned for Sam to come closer. He didn't notice it before—wow, maybe his trashy hoodie was really throwing her aesthetic off—but her long, purple flared dress barely covered some knee-high laced-up boots. Her clothes were undoubtedly made from some fancy material, but again Sam wouldn't be able to name what.

"I want you to lead," she whispered. "I will be right behind you. Now let us go."

Nodding, Sam stood up. The princess paused a bit, looking at a corpse. She smoothly closed the sole eye of the greatest person she had ever known and breathed, with an unchanging expression, "Αιώνια μνήμη." And with that she stood right back up.

Strangely, nobody asked the unlikely duo any questions as they left Times Square. No cops, no reporters, no nothing. Meanwhile, Sam was filled with a bajillion of his own, but every time he tried to ask, he found himself strangely mute.

If it was any other city than New York, there might've been some curious strangers interested in the strange sight. A boy stripped to a t-shirt in the middle of the winter, followed by a girl who kept her head down and hood up, but walked with a proud stride befitting of royalty. Both of them wearing streaks of dried blood. But alas, the two didn't ask for help, and so the rest of the city didn't give a damn.

At one point, the boy pulled out his phone, realizing far too late he should've called his parents. This drew a reaction from the girl who nearly whispered for him to turn it off, but she relaxed when they both realized the phone was broken. Sam wondered when it happened. Maybe it was during the initial explosion? He still wasn't aware of what happened in Times Square. A gas leak? A terrorist attack? Or—taking in account his company—an assassination?

After a long walk, they turned into an unassuming skyscraper, pushing a revolving door to reveal a fancy lobby. Sam knew his family was fairly rich—well, duh, he lived in an apartment in Manhattan—but his parents never told him their salary. Yet no matter what it was, he knew it dwarfed to the treasury of the girl right next to him. He did his usual shuffle on the black rug; he did not want to know what was on his sneakers. The princess hesitated, but then imitated him. Funnily, she looked out of place.

“Mr. Park?” the concierge asked, standing up from the white marble desk. “Are you alright? Where is your sister? Do you need me to call your parents? And who's this lady. . .?”

“I'll call my parents myself,” Sam said, glad to see a familiar face. “Oh, Kevin—they took my sister to a hospital. I don't know which one. Can you find out?”

“Yes, sir,” Kevin said, with no idea how he'll do that.

“And she—” Sam said, looking behind him. “She's, uh, a friend.”

“A friend,” Kevin said, somewhat unconvinced.

“Don't tell anyone, okay? Fine, here.” Sam said, pulling some spare change from his jeans. The coins splattered on the desk, and the concierge dove to prevent some from falling.

“You have my word,” Kevin said upon returning to his neutral stance. “Have a good night, sir. And madam.”

“You’re a pain as always,” Sam said. The girl smiled, but she didn’t say a word as they turned to the elevator. The doors immediately opened in the lobby, and Sam winced when he left a smear on button fourteen. They ascended, both still not saying a word until Sam couldn’t take it anymore.

“So,” Sam said. “Uh, do you like elevator music?”

“Kill me now,” he thought silently.

“Did you give your butler a tip?” the girl said, ignoring his question. “American customs always confused me.”

“What? No, Kevin’s just a greedy jerk, but he gets the job done if you pay him.”

“I would love to hire him. Your butler is very polite, and he does not pry. He would be an improvement over the maids in the palace who love to gossip all day.”

“He’s, um, not a butler. He’s a concierge.”

“Concierge?” she asked.

“Kevin, uh, handles everybody who lives in this apartment. Like the mail and stuff. He keeps an eye on security, too. Uh, now that I think about it, I dunno if I should’ve asked him to find out where my sister is. Is that even part of his job? Like, I know he can book restaurants and stuff but I dunno about random stuff like that.”

She was silent for a bit.

“Kill me now,” Sam thought again.

“I apologize. I was under the impression your family owned the entire building.”

“Uh, yeah. No,” he said.

The two both stayed silent until the elevator dinged fourteen. When it did, Sam fumbled around with his wallet to find his attached keys, already pulling them out before the doors

opened. A short walk later and he also nearly dropped them as he jammed them into the keyhole. He could feel the princess boring her eyes into him as he finally opened the door.

“Right. So, uh, you can use my sister’s room to sleep tonight. Second door on the left. Bathroom’s first door on the right. Go take a shower first. I’ll find some of my mom’s pajamas for you. It might be too big but we can make it work.”

Another pause. Those pauses were incredibly nerve-wracking, intentional or not. “I believe you should go to the bathroom first.”

“What? Oh, no, ladies first. L-listen, uh, I gotta call my parents about my sister. I can already see the answering machine is beeping and they’re going to kill me and so, uh, yeah.”

She didn’t say anymore but instead gazed down. Down at his stomach. No. . .his pants.

Sam suddenly realized he didn’t need to go to the bathroom for quite some time.

“Kill me now,” Sam thought as he hobbled off.